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FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 003892

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2017

TAGS: PREL MOPS PGOV RS GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA MISSILE INCIDENT: MOSCOW CONTINUES TO DENY INVOLVEMENT

REF: TBILISI 1958

Classified By: CDA Daniel A. Russell. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Russia's Special Negotiator for South Ossetia, Ambassador Yuriy Popov, reiterated to Charge August 8 that Russia played "no part" in the August 6 bombing incident in Georgia. Popov emphasized that Russia did not intend to let the incident jeopardize what he characterized as the improving trend in Russian-Georgian relations. Popov expressed hope for progress at the next Joint Control Commission (JCC) meeting expected to take place in Tbilisi in late September. Our contacts in Moscow reacted to the missile incident with puzzlement; most believe Russia has no reason to provoke a derailment of the peace process in the South Ossetia dispute. An MFA statement August 8 accused opponents of the JCC process of being behind the incident.
End Summary.

¶2. (C) Charge spoke with Ambassador Yuriy Popov, the GOR's Special Envoy to the Joint Control Commission (JCC), August 8 regarding the August 6 bombing incident in Georgia. Charge drew from points in Department's press statement condemning the attack and urging cooperation in the investigation. Popov insisted that Russia had played "no part" in the incident. Popov maintained that the planes had flown westward and "intruded" into the zone of the conflict from the east, dropped a bomb, made a U turn and returned back to where they started. Thus, he claimed, the planes could have originated only in Georgia. Popov planned to arrive at Tskhinvali on August 8. He said that earlier August 8 he and

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the Georgian JCC co-chair had reached agreement in principle that the next JCC meeting would take place in Tbilisi sometime in the second half of September. When asked whether Kokoity would attend, Popov said that he personally planned to urge him to do in a meeting later the same day. Popov stated that Russia did not intend to let the incident jeopardize what he characterized as an improving trend in Russian-Georgian relations. He appreciated US support in keeping Georgia engaged in dialogue.

¶3. (U) Earlier August 8, the Russian Air Force reiterated its claim that "Russian planes did not fly any mission in this area on Monday, nor did they cross into sovereign Georgia." The Air Force dismissed the Georgian claim that the Russian identification mark on the unexploded missile be a reliable proof, noting that Russian-made weapons are ubiquitous in the CIS region, including in Georgia.

¶4. (U) An August 8 MFA statement attributed the incident to opponents of "normalization" in South Ossetia. The statement "certain circles" of "new provocations to prove that earlier negotiations and peace-keeping mechanisms involving Russia are not effective." The statement alleged that such provocations were evident "every time there are indications

of possible agreements within the JCC."

¶ 15. (C) Pro-Kremlin analyst Sergey Markov, Director of the Political Research Institute, predictably echoed the GOR announcement and accused Georgia of provocation. However, most Russian experts expressed bewilderment at the missile incident. Most saw no good reason why the GOR would seek to orchestrate such an act. Alexey Bogaturov, Dean of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), saw no advantage to Russia in provoking a conflict with Georgia. He surmised that either a technical mistake by the Russian military or the intrigue of President Saakashvili's inner circle was the culprit.

¶ 16. (C) Ivan Safranchuk, Director of the World Security Institute, agreed that Russia had no reason to provoke a border incident. Fedor Lukyanov, Editor-in-Chief of the journal Russia in Global Affairs, told us he regarded the incident as "a mystery" and that he "did not know whom to believe." Lukyanov said that Russia's interest lay in stabilization of the Russian-Georgian bilateral relationship. Lukyanov claimed that Moscow has grown tired of South Ossetian "President" Eduard Kokoity and might be more amenable to reaching a solution.

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